THE SUNDAY TIMES

SE Features
HD **Are vegans wrong?**
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WC 621 words
PD 12 June 2022
SN The Sunday Times
SC ST
ED 1; National
PG 29
LA English
CY © Times Newspapers Limited 2022

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Ditching meat and milk isn't as healthy (or ethical) as they say

The Great Plant-Based Con Why Eating a Plants-only Diet Won't Improve Your Health or Save the Planet by Jayne Buxton Piatkus £25 pp544

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Anxious meat-eaters are being brainwashed, Jayne Buxton says. They are being shamed by the fashionable consensus that a "plant-based diet will improve our health and save the planet". A seasoned "myth-buster" whose 1998 polemic Mother War: Starting the Workplace Revolution challenged stereotypes around working mothers, Buxton now wants to do a similar job with food, and correct what she sees as misleading claims about the personal and environmental benefits of veganism.

She starts with ultraprocessed plant-based foods, which are not healthier. Nut milks, vegan cheese, "fake meats" and other vegan substitutes are nutritionally inferior to wholefoods because they are depleted in fibre, macronutrients and bioactive compounds. A non-dairy double cream has a shelf life of nine months and includes palm fat, sugar and colourants.

Should we stick to vegan wholefoods, then, and eat piles of fruit and vegetables? Buxton suggests not, pointing to studies that suggest that the vitamin content of fruit and vegetables is overstated relative to animal-sourced foods. The "five-a-day" slogan that so many of us live by was no more than a marketing campaign, she says, and these foods should not be placed on a "nutrition pedestal" a relief to anyone struggling to reach their daily quota.

And what about the environment and those cow burps we hear so much about? According to 2019 government data, emissions from UK livestock constitute just 5 per cent of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions; transport and energy supply account for more than half of all emissions. Amid air travel, coal-burning factories and fleets of lorries, we are vilifying farmers and the vital food they produce. This is because cutting back on meat and milk is doable, a simple way to alleviate our climate anxiety, whether or not it makes a material impact, Buxton says.

Yet one question that has no easy answer is whether, ethically speaking, we should be killing and eating animals at all. The book references an interview with John Chester, whose mission to create a sustainable farm in California was the subject of a hit Netflix documentary, The Biggest Little Farm. He said: "For me to

grow 214 acres of stone fruit and avocados on this farm requires me to kill at least 35-40,000 gophers a year." Is the life of a cow worth more than the life of a gopher?

The Great Plant-Based Con is persuasive, entertaining and well researched. I certainly feel better armed for a dinner table debate on the pros and cons of plant-based diets. And the book will help to alleviate the guilt many of us feel about our diets. Buxton says there is no environmentally perfect way to eat, so we should not dive into plant-based food in a blind panic.

However, she does suggest a few rules at the end of her book: eat fresh, seasonal plant and animal foods. Avoid sugar and processed foods. Choose organic, locally farmed, free-range meat, fish and dairy if you can afford to.

One piece of advice stuck with me above all others, though, and it did not come from a farmer, an academic or a nutritionist. It was a mantra repeated by Buxton's mother when she was growing up and will be familiar to many of us: a little bit of everything will do you good. Perhaps Mum does know best, after all. c

Processed plant-based foods are not healthier

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